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# Gender representation and related effects in planning for rural development

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## Abstract

In rural development, the issue of female representation has become part of the agenda in Germany. To examine the topic of gender representation and the results arising from different programming strategies/approaches, we analyse empirical data from the evaluation of LEADER which forms part of Rural Development Programmes in the EU. LEADER is a place-based and participatory approach which involves a Local Action Group (LAG) composed of stakeholders from local government, civil society and economy steering the implementation of its local development strategy.

To examine gender aspects within LEADER, we utilise results from the 2014-2020 funding period, especially structural data of 115 LAGs in four federal states in Germany. Main material was collected by means of three surveys, using written questionnaires (LAG member survey, LAG management survey, survey of beneficiaries).

Regarding results, we looked at the share of females in the decision-making bodies of LAGs. The results for different federal states range from 26 % to 42 %. Thereby, there is a (slight) increase in the share of females is observed in all four federal states in comparison with previous funding periods. The highest share of 40 % can easily be explained : it was the only federal state with a fixed quota (one third of board members had to be females). The other three federal states also address the topic but only make soft regulations like “there should be a balanced gender representation” – which leads to mixed results in the composition of board members. However, it is also observed that the federal state with the weakest requirements has the lowest female representation.

We further examine the consequences of gender representation for decision-making within the LAGs, whereby a gender gap in social preferences and priorities is confirmed.

## 1 Introduction & research questions

In general, the EU promotes the gender mainstreaming of rural development policies because retaining women in rural areas is seen as crucial to the long-term viability of rural areas (Bock 2015). But also, or even especially in rural contexts there are barriers for female participation (Pini 2006; Bock & Derkzen 2008; Shortall 2008). In rural development planning in the EU, in context of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), the issue of female representation is starting to become part of the agenda in Germany (Raue 2021). To examine the topic of gender representation in rural development and the results and consequences arising from different programming strategies/approaches, we analyse empirical data from the evaluation of LEADER which is an integral part of RDPs.

LEADER is a place-based and participatory approach which involves a Local Action Group (LAG) composed of stakeholders from local government, civil society and economy steering the implementation of its local development strategy (LDS). The LDS outlines the main objectives and strategies for implementation in the LEADER region, following a bottom-up approach. For this, each LAG is allocated its own budget (approx. 3 million euros) to support local projects within a given EU funding period. Regarding the bottom-up approach, LEADER is related to discussions about a 'new' rural local governance, whereby rural social scientists have demonstrated significant interest in documenting the new forms of governance emerging in rural areas. However, little attention has been given to examining the gendered aspects of these new arrangements (Pini 2006).

Another feature of LEADER implementation is that it occurs in a multilevel system (Pollermann et al. 2020). Managing authorities set basic funding conditions (in line with EU requirements) to define the room of manoeuvre for LEADER / the LAGs (Pollermann et al. 2014a). An example of regulations set by the managing authorities are requirements/criteria for the approval of the LDSs and the LAGs at the beginning of a funding period. This is one leverage point for fostering equal gender representation in LEADER as a policy instrument for rural development. One readily available measure to capture a gender gap is the share of women compared to men in arrangement/groups/boards for decision making.

Bock (2015) describes the transition of political interest in rural women in the context of the EU's rural development policy over the last few funding periods stating that "the European Commission stresses the need to address the disadvantaged position of women, to support female employment and to take women's specific needs into account in order to prevent the rural exodus of women,

which is perceived as a major problem for the sustainability of rural areas.” The study also examines the adaptation of gender mainstreaming on the national level, one conclusion being that based on the gender considerations in the EU’s rural policy, one would assume that gender and rural development policy agendas go hand in hand, meanwhile in the actual implementation it appears that “gender mainstreaming means little more than funding some separate projects for women” (Bock 2015).

Thus, a crucial point of implementation of gender mainstreaming is the role of women in decision-making. The aim to support a higher share of women is based on different argumentations:

- a) fair representation
- b) development for all (different needs)/include views of women and men.

The state of knowledge regarding argumentation a) is that an underrepresentation within the share of females is widely known in political processes (also for rural areas, Pini 2006). Regarding LEADER, there are different previous observations in literature. For example, in Denmark (see Thuesen & Derzken 2016), the share of female board members across all LAGs is 31 % and an upward tendency can be observed, the more the municipality is urbanized/centrally placed in Denmark. This could indicate a more ‘modern’ lifestyle in the centrally placed municipalities, with women there being more involved. The differences are, however, not that large: the share of women in “outskirt municipalities” is 28 and in “intermediate municipalities” 34% (Thuesen & Derzken 2016). Also, data about female participation within LEADER in the previous funding period (2000-2006) shows that female underrepresentation was a common observation in most of EU-countries, especially low rates have been observed in some southern European countries. In Greece, the share of women in 100 % of LAGs falls below 25 %. In Italy, this is the case in almost three-quarters of all LAGs (73 %) and in Spain in more than 68 %. (Thuesen & Derzken 2016: table 11). In Germany, the share of females in LAG-boards varies in five examined federal states from 27 % to 44 % in the CAP 2007-2013 funding period, with an average share of 26 % across all 98 LAGs (Pollermann et al. 2014b).

Regarding argumentation b) different studies suggest there is a gender gap in social preferences and priorities with related consequences for decision-making (Hessami & da Fonseca 2020). For example, according to Pearson et al. (2017), quite a number of studies detect a small but persistent gender gap in environmental concern, specifically showing that women typically express greater levels of concern than men.

Against this background, we elaborated two research questions for this conference contribution:

- (I) “What is the share of females in the decision-making bodies of LAGs (2014-2022) in Germany and how is this affected by regulations of programme authorities?”
- (II) “What are the effects of gender representation for decision-making within the LAGs?”

## 2 Data & Methods

To examine gender aspects within LEADER, we utilise results from the 2014-2020 funding period, especially structural data of 115 LAGs in four federal states in Germany (each with its own RDP). These constitute 24 LEADER regions in Hesse (HE), 41 in Lower-Saxony (NI), 28 in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), and 22 in Schleswig-Holstein (SH).

Basic data sources are funding documents, especially the regulations and guidelines from the EU and the four federal states. An important element are the requirements for the approval of LDS, where the federal states could set preconditions for the selection of LAGs (Fynn & Pollermann 2022).

Beyond this, data used for this contribution was obtained by means of four empirical data collections:

- Two LAG member surveys (mainly executed as online surveys): members of 115 LAGs decision-making bodies in 2017/2018 (requested persons N=3308, answering persons n=2192, response rate: 66 percent) and again in 2021 (requested persons N=3320, answering persons n=2000, response rate: 60% percent). Usually, a six point Likert scale was used to classify personal estimations of the LAG members. But when a middle/neutral rating seemed necessary, a five point Likert scale was used. Distinctions were made between different types of actor (for example, based on gender) to allow for a comparison of different views.
- Two (annual) requests of activities and organisational structures in the areas, which all LAG-managers of the 115 LEADER regions were required to fill out with data for the 2017 and 2020. This includes relevant information about all members of the LAG-boards.

In addition, material from the LEADER evaluation of the previous funding period was available (Pollermann et al. 2014b).

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Share of females in the decision-making bodies of LAGs and effect of regulations of programme authorities

The decision-making bodies of the examined LEADER regions (“LAG boards”) most often consist of 10 to 30 members. Their main task is decision-making about funding of local projects for rural development. There are requirements for the involvement of a minimum of 50 % non-public actors on the LAG boards. In practice, the public sector makes up 40-50 % and civil society and the business sector generally make up 50-60 % of the boards. The public sector participants are often participating „ex officio“, thus leeway in selection is limited and in certain positions (e. g mayors), there is a male dominance. Regarding the civil society/business sector, the decision on who should represent the organisation on the LAG board is usually made by the groups themselves and normally depends on position, experience and commitment to LEADER. In both sectors, more men than women dominate in leading positions; in earlier funding periods often only 15-25 % of board member were female, with some LAG-boards lacking female representation altogether (Pollermann et al. 2014).

Regarding results, we looked at the share of females on LAG-boards in the four study areas in 2020 and 2017. The results are shown in table 1. In comparison, the results from the previous funding period (2007-2013) are shown in parentheses.

**Table 1:** Share of female participation on LAG-boards

Federal state <sup>1</sup>	HE	NI	NRW	SH
<b>Regulation</b>	No specific requirement (only EU framing)	„should“ be a gender-balance	Fixed Quota of 33%, „should“ be a gender-balance	„should“ be a gender-balance
<b>Results:</b>	26 % (2020) 22 % (2017) 19 % (2013)	31 % (2020) 29 % (2017) 28 % (2013)	42 % (2020) 40 % (2017) 20 % (2013)	27 % (2020) 24 % (2017) 21 % (2013)

<sup>1</sup> Hesse (HE), Lower Saxony (NI), North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Schleswig-Holsten (SH)

<sup>2</sup> One full-time position corresponds to 40 working hours per week

**Source:** Fynn & Pollermann (2022)

Thus, a (slight) increase in the share of females is observed in all four federal states. There is an easy explanation for the higher share in North Rhine-Westphalia: it was the only federal state with a fixed quota (one third of board members had to be females). The other three federal states also address the topic but only make soft regulations like “there should be a balanced gender representation” – which leads to mixed results in the composition of board members in the various regions. However, it is also observed that the federal state with the weakest requirements has the lowest female representation.

Thus, altogether it is confirmed that some structural discrimination is also relevant in LEADER (Bock & Derzken 2008). Changes also depend on general shifts in society. If no binding(!) action is taken („Waiting for the trend“) a gender balance would be reached no earlier than 2050 (Raue 2021).

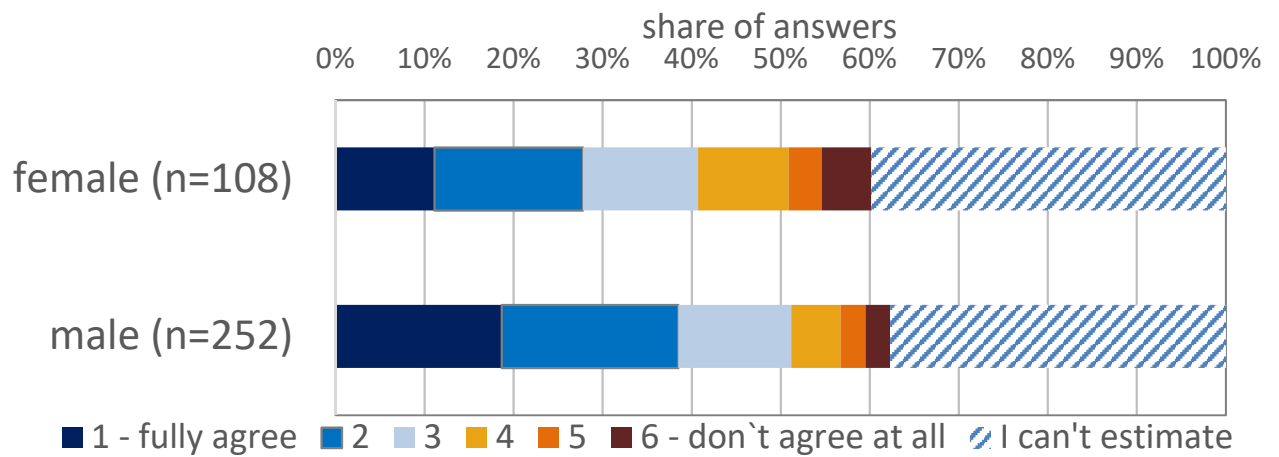
The regulations of the federal states show expected results: a „should“ regulation is not enough (path dependency), a binding quota in NRW, on the other hand, works quite well. The issue „quota“ always leads to intensive discussions, but in the end a 33 % quota was effective and not that difficult to implement (e. g. it was not mentioned as a problem in open questions of the LAG management surveys). Keeping in mind participation “ex officio” (together with high share of men in key positions of rural society), it can be assumed that a 50 % quota would be more difficult to fulfil, although sometimes it only comes down to the effort placed in searching for/motivating more women to join the LAG board.

### **3.2 Effects of gender representation for decision-making within the LAGs**

To examine the influence of gender representation for decision-making within the LAGs, we analyse differences in the answers between male and female LAG board members.

In figure 1, estimations of board members regarding project selection are shown. The answers to the item „Regarding project contents, gender justice is taken into account“ indicate, that women have higher demands for a consideration of gender justice within projects than men. Beyond this expectable difference, it should be taken into account that both genders have a very high share of „I can't estimate“, which shows that clarifications for this topic are needed.

**Figure 1:** Male/female estimations about consideration of gender justice in context of projects



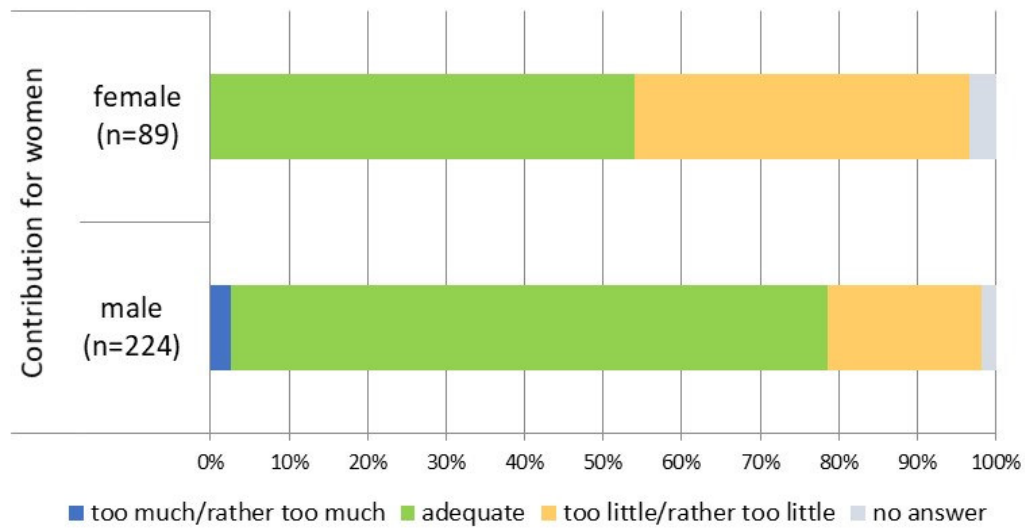
**Source:** LAG board member survey 2021 (example from one federal state); Fynn & Pollermann (2022)

The results shown in figure 2 underpin the differences. Regarding the question “How are the following target groups (here: women) taken into account during the implementation of the local development strategy?”, 43 % of women, but only 20 % of men estimate that the target group „women“ is considered: „too little“/„rather to little“. The difference is significant<sup>1</sup> and remains so regardless of the institutional background of the respondents.

<sup>1</sup> Also, if different institutional origins are taken into account (Raue 2022).



**Figure 2:** Male/female estimations about consideration within LDS-implementation (target groups)

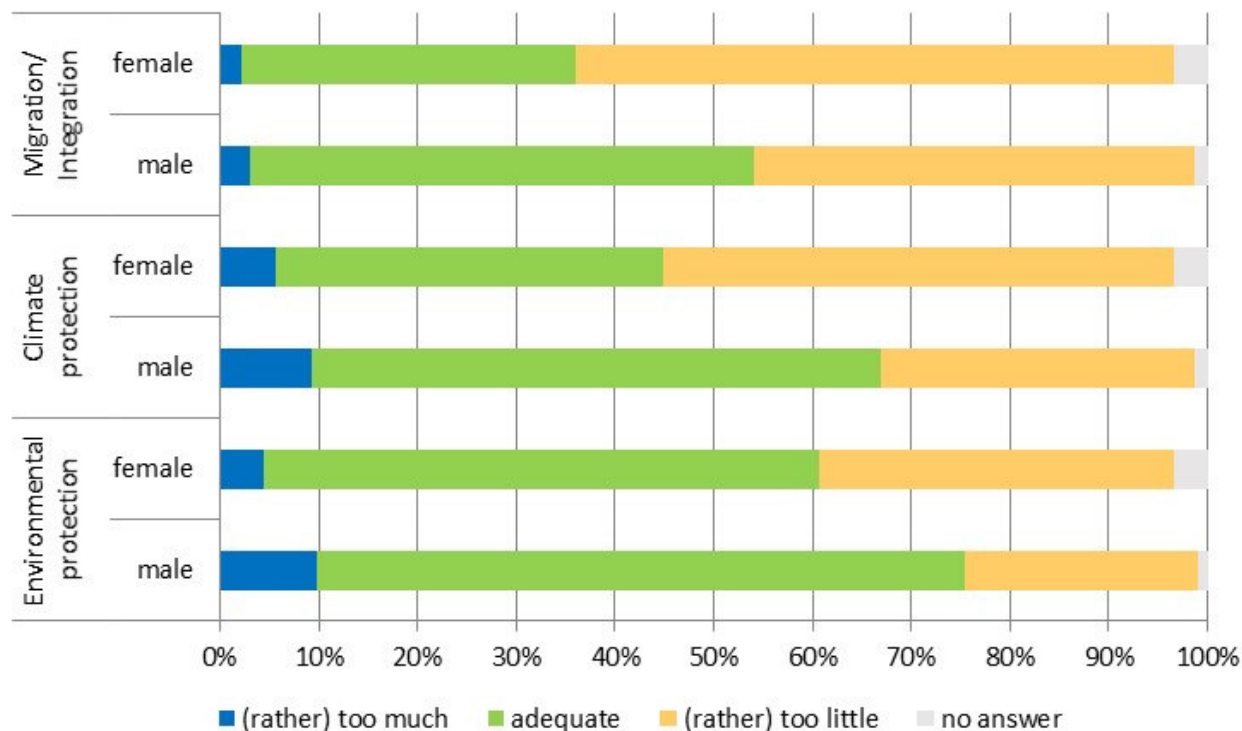


**Source:** LAG-board-member survey 2018 (example of one federal state); Raue (2022)

The survey also delivers insights about the valuation of different societal topics. Figure 3 shows answers to the question “How are the following topics taken into account during the implementation of the local development strategy?”. In general for all three topics the share of men, who estimate the efforts as already adequate is higher than the share of women.

However, in this context we have to point out that the differences in the male/female estimations shown in figure 3 are not clearly significant if all federal states are included and further parameter like institutional origin of the respondents are incorporated.

**Figure 3:** Male/female estimations about considerations within LDS-implementation (topics)



**Source:** LAG-board-member survey 2018 (example of one federal state); Raue (2022)

## 4 Conclusion & Recommendations

In order to contribute to gender mainstreaming in a “bottom-up” approach like LEADER, female participation should be fostered by „top-down“ regulations (quota) at beginning of the EU funding period.

There should be regulations at EU level as well as at level of the federal states. Based on our findings from the evaluation of LEADER in four German RDPs, we recommend that LAG approval criteria set a fixed minimum quota of 33 % to support adequate representation of women on LAG boards. Non-fulfilment of this requirement should only be allowed restrictively. Nonetheless taking into consideration unique circumstances in the different rural areas, the possibility to opt-out of the requirement is reasonable as it prevents relevant (male) LAG members from previous funding periods from being dismissed just for the sake of gender balance.

Such deliberations have not been fully implemented for the funding period 2023 – 2027: there is no quota regulation on EU-level nor on the federal level in Germany. However, some federal states have introduced or maintained their quota regulations. Further debates can be expected for the post-2027 policy process.

Beyond clear measures like quotas, there are further tasks to put the topic of gender justice in LEADER contexts. There is a need to discuss topics surrounding gender representation/justice as a way of fostering capacity building and to raise awareness in local communities and within programme authorities. An example for possible instruments are guidelines for project selection processes and project implementations.

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